

THE BOHEMIAN WHO WROTE "HATIKVAH"

The Career of Naphtali Herz Imber

GERARD H. WILK

FORTY years ago a man collapsed on Forsyth Street on the Lower East Side and subsequently died in Mount Moriah Hospital, of starvation and cheap liquor. The Rivington Street congregation refused the use of its synagogue for funeral services; services were finally held in the Attorney Street synagogue. When the coffin was brought to Mount Zion cemetery in Long Island, the streets along the way were lined with people singing the dead man's songs—for he had been a poet. The songs were in Hebrew. One of them was called "Hatikvah"—"The Hope."

When the State of Israel was founded two years ago, it surprised no one to hear that "Hatikvah" had become the national anthem. Somewhat later a movie entitled *Hatikvah* was produced in New York, with shots of Israel accompanying the song, and at the preview someone asked who had written it. Silence filled the studio. Finally a girl with a background of French films and Zionism ventured a name: "Uh—Ubairr, wasn't it?"

It wasn't. It was Imber. Naphtali Herz Imber of Zloczov.

Jews all over the world are familiar with the song "Hatikvah," now the official anthem of the State of Israel. But few know the name and fewer still the history of the man who wrote it: Naphtali Herz Imber. GERARD H. WILK here tells of the life and work of Imber—bohemian, poet, wit, and the original of Israel Zangwill's *The Jewish Hamlet*. Mr. Wilk was born in Berlin in 1902 and earned the degree of Doctor of Laws at the University of Göttingen. He lived in Yugoslavia from 1933 until 1941, when he was interned by the Italians. After his liberation he worked for some time for the United States Office of War Information and since 1946 has lived in New York, where he has worked with the Voice of America and with NBC. Before 1933 Mr. Wilk published numerous articles in German periodicals, for which he has again been writing since the end of the war.

Today you can find "Hatikvah" in the New York Public Library, under the letter I in "Hymns of the United Nations." You will find a copyrighted English text by Dr. Such-and-such, and beside it the Hebrew text—without author. Ask a hundred people interested in Jewish things whether they happen to know who wrote the anthem, and ninety-nine will be silent. The man is as unknown to ardent American Zionists as to the young Israelis, who know not only "Hatikvah" but other songs of his by heart.

A few books on eccentric personalities mention Imber's name in passing. There are encyclopedias that call him "the first romantic Hebrew poet since Judah Halevi" and let it go at that. His obituaries, after some derogatory comment on his way of life, compared him to Poe, Verlaine, and Villon—one American and two French drunkards of genius. His immortality is credited to Israel Zangwill, who caricatured him as a *shnorrer* poet. But today Zangwill's books are gathering dust on library shelves, unread, while Imber's songs are on the lips of a nation.

His immortality rests on his songs. What has been forgotten is an intriguing personality and the colorful life of a Jewish minstrel who dedicated his first poem to a European emperor and his last to an Asiatic one, who spent his youth between castles and the gutter, had great ladies dry his tears when he was a grown man, and drank himself to death on a dollar a day from a member of the United States judiciary.

"Poor Imber," his Yiddish necrologer sighed in 1909. "They were all so ignorant of him!"

Those who did know him, who lined the streets of New York after his death and were proud of him in the unhappy lands of Eastern Europe, are now all but extinct. Recently his name came up in conversation with a native Palestinian lady and an Israeli of-

ficial. The *sabra* had never heard of him; she was not interested, either. She disliked "Hatikvah"; in her opinion it could not hold a candle to real Hebrew folk songs: "*Mishmar Hayarden* for instance—" The young lady (who knew seven languages, by the way, along with their literature) could hardly believe that "Watch on the Jordan," the old song of Palestinian pioneers, was written by the same man. But the servant of the world's newest state spread his hands: "I shouldn't know Imber? When he was born in Zloczov?"

HE WAS born in Zloczov, Bukovina, on December 27, 1856. This seems to be the correct date, although some other sources give the year as 1854, 1857, or 1858. Imber's stature is not such as to have these minor discrepancies noted in works of reference.*

Bukovina is a bleak, overcrowded, perennially poverty-stricken back country in the foothills of the Carpathian Mountains. In *Half-Asia*, a 19th-century novelist entitled his stories about the region. In those days it was the easternmost part of the Austrian Empire, in the crown province of Galicia. A small, German-speaking bureaucracy governed the native Ruthenians, Rumanians, Carpatho-Russians, Gypsies, and Jews. The people were seldom restive. To console them in their drab existence there was always the knowledge that things could be worse—a few miles north or east, under Russian rule, for the Jews, and a few miles south, under Turkish rule, for the Christians.

The Jews of Bukovina were as poor as the rest of the population, but they were its blood and bile. They kept it functioning in the market place and served as outlet for its rages. They traded, peddled, and were beaten up. At the same time they "learned"—in the Jewish sense of the word—and lived according to an old Jewish, especially Eastern Jewish, *idée fixe*: that learning goes before wealth, and that it is the rich man's privilege to enable the scholar to pursue wisdom.

*I owe an acknowledgment to Mr. Abraham Berger of the Jewish Division of the New York Public Library for invaluable assistance in the translation of Hebrew documents by and about Imber.

They used to tell in Zloczov that one day a famous rabbi came to town, following a rumor that it harbored an *ilui*, a prodigy: a ten-year-old who studied the Zohar. Little Naphtali was brought to the synagogue; the examination turned into a dispute; eventually the rabbi declared himself beaten. He congratulated the community on a child who would no doubt be the peer of the greatest *rabbonim*, but the elders sadly shook their heads. The visitor asked why, and was told that on the Sabbath, while his family was at the synagogue, the boy used to invite all the beggars in town to food and what he could find of his father's money. The rabbi smiled: good deeds might excuse the profanation of the Sabbath. The elders went on: when he was not stealing from his poor father, Naphtali would spend the Sabbath with the daughter of rich Samuel Auerbach, studying German. The rabbi frowned, but said that thirst for knowledge might excuse the profanation of the Sabbath. They continued: once, coming home before his father, Naphtali felt hungry and saw a cock in the yard; so he ran to his mother, kissed her, and cooed: "Why wait for Father? Can't the cock make *kiddush*?" This, as the story goes, so shocked the rabbi that he left town and never came back.

The little tale sounds made up, and it probably was. But there is the whole of Naphtali Herz Imber in it, as well as his fate.

His father's name was Samuel Jacob; nothing further about him is known except that he was poor, rigidly orthodox, and generally on bad terms with his prankish son. By way of compensation the boy attached himself to his mother. She called him "Herzl"—we may note that his middle name Herz means "heart" in German, as in Yiddish. He remained devoted to her for the rest of his life. In a sense, he reflected her in his life. Though her name, Hodel, is the only recorded fact we have about the poet's mother, we know her through her son.

There were other children in the family. Two, at least, were boys—one, as an old man, wrote his brother's only existing—desultory and defensive—biography for a selected edi-

tion of his works, published in 1929 in Tel Aviv, in Hebrew, and never translated into another language. Then there was a sister, Nechamah. She was three years younger than Herzl, who seems to have been insanely jealous of her. His brother, without suggesting a reason, relates that Herzl never spoke to the girl, could not stand looking at her, and kept asking why she was not thrown out of the house. The only break in his correspondence with his mother came when she dared to tell him in a letter that his sister had married. He stopped writing for a year.

He once said he had been a deaf-mute and paralyzed until he was seven. Perhaps he was speaking metaphorically; no such fact is mentioned elsewhere. Anyway, he caught up fast, although we have it on his brother's authority that the *behelfer*, the assistant and truant officer of the *cheder*, had trouble getting him to school. It was "poorly conducted," Imber said many years later. But at eight he was said to know more than the fifteen-year-olds; and at ten he was an *ilui*, a full-fledged Talmudist and a student of Cabala who was allowed to preach in the "Grosse Shul"—not sermonizing in the Western sense, of course, but soliloquizing during the general inspirational exegesis that was the main part of Jewish worship in those days and lands.

HE PREACHED and learned in the Great Synagogue, and we are told that while all others learned noisily, in Hasidic fashion, he would learn quietly. He read all day and all night. With Miss Auerbach he read the German books in her father's library. She was much older (going on twenty, perhaps—an age when a good Jewish daughter should be married), and she seems to have given the boy the intellectual guidance that his own mother's love could not provide. He read German poems and started writing some of his own, but neither in German nor in his native Yiddish, only in Hebrew. In the tongue of David and the prophets the ten-year-old wrote verse. On Biblical subjects? Not Herzl. His first poem dealt with the Austro-Prussian War of the past year, 1866, and his second with the civil rights granted to Austrian Jews

by their Emperor after he had lost the war.

Enfranchisement meant little to the Imbers, but to the Auerbachs it meant a lot. At their house young Imber heard the new, liberal Austria praised to the skies. So far he had mainly associated Francis Joseph with the gendarmes who arrested you "in the name of the Emperor," usually as a prelude to twenty-five lashes. Now, when his next inspiration produced a patriotic Hebrew poem, "Austria," he sent it to Vienna, humbly dedicated to His Majesty on the impending centennial of Bukovina's annexation to the monarchy. In due time the twelve-year-old heard from his sovereign. He got a personal letter of thanks and a fortune: twenty-five guilders. "The Emperor," he observed, "always gives twenty-five, guilders or lashes."

Soon after, rich Samuel Auerbach's daughter suddenly died and Herzl Imber left Zloczov. He never came back.

He went to Brody and Lemberg (now Lvov), the cultural centers of Galicia. A Dr. Levinstein took the young scholar into his house and arranged for his further education. He associated with men familiar to students of 19th-century Jewish intellectual life—Schorr, Krochmal, Mussen—and wrote for Herschel Schorr's periodical *Hehalutz* (a word which then simply meant a pioneer in progress and general enlightenment). But Brody and Lemberg could only hold him for a few years. They were way stations. There was a tide of youth rolling westward to the cities of Europe, to their universities and theaters, academies and laboratories, cafés and salons, to the knowledge and the civilization of the West; and the gate to the West was Vienna. Imber let the tide carry him. He left Galicia for Vienna. The *peyes*, the mark of his origin, vanished en route. At fifteen he arrived in the imperial city on the Danube, a modern young man.

He tried to see the only correspondent he had in the capital, and he succeeded. Francis Joseph of Austria was not in the habit of granting audiences to Jews, least of all to poor Jewish boys from the East, but he received Imber. Afterwards the youth got another royal present of twenty-five guilders,

and though he had no actual or potential source of income he sent the whole amount to Zloczov, to his mother.

IN LEAVING Vienna he marked himself off for the first time from a hundred thousand others of his kind. The tide was running westward, but he turned east.

He followed the Danube down to the Black Sea, through Hungary and Serbia, to Rumania (or, to be historically exact, to Wallachia and Moldavia, the two Danube principalities under the suzerainty of the Ottoman Porte) and to Bessarabia. He traveled without money or luggage, walking much of the time, accepting hospitality when offered and employment when necessary. But he was no *shnorrer* making the round of Jewish communities, no tramp, no itinerant Torah student; he fitted into no category. Actually he was a medieval atavism, a relic of the extinct species of wandering minstrels who used to pay their way in song and story, wit and wisdom. A line of kinship runs from Syskind of Trimberg, the Jewish minnesinger of the 12th century, to Naphtali Herz Imber of the 19th—always broke but never without something to give to the needy; his pockets always bulging, but only with scraps of paper scribbled full of Hebrew verses.

He had a happy time. Of course he had no documents attesting his right to live, let alone to gad about the Balkans, but he seemed to need none. He crossed one border by showing officials a year-old Austrian railway ticket stub in lieu of a passport. He crossed another as the part-time secretary of a general. If he had to work, he managed to do it for the nobility. They ate much better and were more appreciative of culture. In 1876 we find him tutoring in Baron Moshe Waldberg's castle near Jassy in northern Moldavia. From the hilltops one saw the Austrian border, but it had ceased to stir patriotic feelings in Imber. Bukovina was just beyond the border; it was barely a day's trip home. But if he thought of home now he thought in Hebrew verse.

Between teaching German and the three R's to the junior Barons Waldberg he wrote

a song about home. It had nothing to do with Zloczov. Home was not Zloczov; it was none of the innumerable Zloczovs where Jews had been living as strangers for two thousand years. Their synagogues echoed with the lament of the banished. They prayed to go home from force of habit, without hope. Their mood annoyed the nineteen-year-old in the Rumanian castle. He scrawled eight angry stanzas against it on a piece of paper and above them: "*Tikvosenu—Our Hope.*"

*Kol od balevov p'nimo
Nefesh Yehudi homiyo
Ul'faase mizrach kodimo
Ayin l'Tsion tsofiyo*

*Od lo ovdo tikvosenu
Hatikvo hanoshono
Loshuv le'erets avosenu
Le'ir bo Dovid, Dovid chono.*

(So long as in our heart of hearts
A Jewish pulse is beating,
And Eastward to the Orient
We cast our eye to Zion—

Our ancient Hope will not be lost,
Our age-long aspiration
To turn back to our father's land,
To the city where David dwelt.)

The paper joined the others in his pocket.

In the following year a war broke out. The Balkan peoples rose against their overlord, the Sultan, calling on the Czar for aid in his capacity as protector of Christendom. The response was quick; the first objective of the Russian troops was Jassy. What followed—the Russo-Turkish War, its casualties, its atrocities, the Russian triumph, and the end of Turkish power in Europe—is history. Imber seems never to have mentioned it. He must have been in the thick of the fighting but it did not concern him. Only the instinct of a Jew raised on the Russian border prompted him to stay out of the Cossacks' way.

The end of the war found him in Constantinople. His instinct was sound; it kept him out of the wave of pogroms that for

three years terrorized the Jews of Russia and the newly "liberated" Balkans. On the other hand, conditions in the vanquished empire's refugee-swollen capital were worse than any Imber had yet encountered. He was forced to earn his living as a peddler—his only excursion into the realm of business, for which he had so little talent. To Imber, putting himself and his pocketful of poems behind a pushcart was to touch bottom. After a while he was catapulted to the top of the world.

IN THE summer of 1882 an English gentleman came to Constantinople as field representative of the Mansion House Relief Fund for Persecuted Jews. A man in his fifties, of striking looks and irresistible charm, he traveled with his wife who was twenty years younger and by all accounts one of the most fascinating women of her time. After three weeks in Lemberg, organizing the reception of the Russian fugitives and sending some to America, Mr. and Mrs. Laurence Oliphant came through Bukovina, Rumania, and Bulgaria to the Sultan's capital for exploratory talks with Turkish officials about resettlement of refugees in Palestine.

They themselves settled on Prince Isle near Therapia, the fashionable suburb on the Bosphorus. According to Mrs. Oliphant's first letter home, her household there included "a Hebrew scholar required for the Hebrew and German and Rumanian correspondence." The scholar was Imber.

How he got there from behind his pushcart remains unknown. It is possible that among the thousands of frightened Jews the Oliphants had met in passing through Bukovina there was a woman from Zloczov who kept talking of her son, her Herzl, who was in Constantinople and a linguist and a prodigy. It is difficult to think of any other reason for a letter that Mrs. Oliphant sent to Zloczov from Therapia, telling the old woman not to worry, she would "care for Herzl like a mother." Nor would a different hypothesis fit Imber's lasting impression of having been received "as a beloved child" by Laurence Oliphant and his wife.

They were two remarkable people. Laur-

ence was a favorite of Queen Victoria's, a friend of the Prince of Wales, a darling of international society; he had been a world traveler, diplomat, war correspondent, novelist, businessman, a man of the world and its affairs—and for the past fifteen years the slave of an American religious impostor. He had quit Parliament to join the Brocton-on-Erie brotherhood of this "prophet," T. L. Harris, signed over all his fortune to it, and toiled as a farmhand. Sent to Europe by Harris, he had met and converted Alice le Strange, an English society beauty; they married and went to Brocton, where she also worked at menial tasks. So did Lady Oliphant, Laurence's aged mother. It took the death of his mother (as well as "most irritating conditions" imposed by Harris—the core of whose creed was a kind of sexual mysticism—on Alice and him) to make Oliphant rebel. He split the brotherhood, sued to recover a part of his money, and returned with his wife to the Old World in order to lead the remnants of the Chosen People back to the Holy Land.

IT WAS a religious idea he had conceived some years before and tried to sell to the Sultan on a political and business basis, with the backing of Benjamin Disraeli's British government, but without success. Now, backed by the Rothschilds and Montagus on the Mansion House Fund committee, he meant to try again on a humanitarian basis.

"When I first met him in Constantinople," Imber said later, "my own Cabalistic mysticism no doubt had its influence on him. . . ." Oliphant had been a mystic for decades. It was natural for him to be drawn to the young expert on Cabala; along with personal sympathies, this common interest unquestionably helped to keep Imber at the Oliphants' for years.

They were busy years. He was secretary, research assistant, Mosaic expert, Hebrew teacher, and English pupil. Late in 1882 the Oliphants moved to Haifa; Laurence had quit his relief job, and on Mount Carmel the couple gathered some German and American admirers into a community like Brocton, but

with a creed of their own. Imber came along and, according to the grudging admission of some writers of biographical sketches, "greatly helped the young Yishuv." It was the time of the First Aliyah (immigration to Palestine about 1890); Russian Jews were laboring in the first, Rothschild-financed colonies, and Imber kept up a running press feud with the Rothschild officials, trumpeting his own and Oliphant's criticism of their mismanagement. He traveled a good deal, in and out of Palestine. He was at the founding of Petach Tikvah. He was in Jerusalem frequently, arguing with Hebrew journalists and making friends with European scientists. He went to Egypt with Professor Vernie of Paris to study the Pyramids, and to Beirut, at Oliphant's expense, to study watchmaking. He wrote poems all the while.

THOSE were fruitful years. He contributed the "Hebrew Testimony" in *Sympneumata or Evolutionary Forces Now Active in Man*, Oliphant's main work (according to Imber, it was "largely the work of his wife, a genius in her way"). He wrote one article after another for the two Hebrew papers in Jerusalem, *Hatz'vi* and *Havatzelet*. He was the first to call the new settlers *hehalutzim*, and today no one remembers the older sense in which Imber had come to know the word in Galicia. Then a volume of his poetry was published in 1886 in Jerusalem, entitled *Barkai* ("The Morning Star") and dedicated to Oliphant. It included the Palestinian poems as well as those Imber had brought along with him from the Balkans. One was *Tikvosenu*. Another, written in Rishon le-Zion, was *Mishmar Hayarden*, which Israel Zangwill was to translate into English:

Let the trumpet be blown,
Let the standard be flown!
Now set we our watch. . . .
Our watchword, "The Sword of our Land
and our Lord!"
On Jordan now set we our watch. . . .

A third was the "Cradle Song Hagdi" that is still sung to the children of Israel.

Those were happy years. He later talked about them with great candor and an almost naive simplicity. His relations with the Oliphants remained a source of eternal wonder to him; he used to list the witnesses to every episode as if he could not quite believe his own stories. The "beloved child" theme ran through them all. In the third person, as though ashamed to brag, he told of "childish kisses," of what would happen "as he was petted" by Mrs. Oliphant, of occasional quarrels: "It was about midnight, in the presence of Mr. Oliphant and the said doctor, that Mr. Imber sat on her knee like a child, and when she tried to persuade him to stay he told her he would rather be in purgatory than in her home. The noble Mrs. Oliphant understood him. She turned to Dr. Buckner: 'My Herzl is a prince, and a noble one.'"

He was in his mid-twenties, she in her mid-thirties. Oliphant was old enough to be the father of both, and a kinder, more understanding father than the one Herzl Imber could not get along with at home; but it was Oliphant's wife whom he adopted as a mother without cherishing his natural one any less. Alice was all that the woman in Zloczov was not: young, beautiful, well-born, cultured. "Noble" was his invariable adjective for this pearl of great price. To be able to sit on her knee, to pour out and receive the only kind of love he ever yearned for, he turned himself back into a child. Indeed, though he collaborated on *Sympneumata*, the fundamentally erotic nature of the Oliphants' mysticism seems to have escaped him altogether.

And yet the Oliphants caused the first of the odd silences that shroud Imber's life. The inevitable mass of material about people of the Oliphants' standing and eccentricity was gathered, edited, and published after their deaths by a writing cousin; but this *Memoir of the Life of Laurence Oliphant and of Alice, His Wife*, makes no mention of Imber except for the few words cited from Alice's first letter from Therapia, on the nameless Hebrew scholar. It seems even more curious if we consider that this one reference dates from a time when Imber was

new at the Oliphants', when he could not be as close to them as he was bound to be later, after years in their house. But perhaps the silence is not so puzzling. The *Memoir* was a defense of the memory of the Oliphants, intended to counteract wild rumors about their creed of "sympneumatic love"—an involved mystery whose foremost practical aspect was sexual self-abnegation in the face of great temptation. Naphtali Herz Imber and his odd, infantile bliss did not fit into the strategy of the defense.

On the day after New Year's, 1886, Alice Oliphant died of a fever caught on a trip to Tiberias. Her husband was crushed; but the establishment of "sympneumatic" contact with her spirit soon made up for his loss. His next book was dictated by her from the Beyond. He became her tool on earth. He even remarried in 1888, in England, because Alice needed "a human assistant of her own sex." Some months later he died of cancer, and the end, according to the second Mrs. Oliphant, was "complete and perfect peace."

By then Imber was no longer in Palestine, either. He had left the year after Alice's death. Nothing made up for his loss.

THE second and sad part of Ahasuerus Imber's travels began as he departed from Palestine—in the phrase of one Jewish literary historian—as a "semi-vagabond." Having come to the Oliphants as a complete vagabond, he would seem to have improved. His brother reports that he first went east, to Bombay, and then doubled back for his long delayed encounter with the West, with Paris, Berlin, and London. No corroborative evidence exists on Paris, Bombay, or Berlin; that he turned up in London we know from the action of a more abiding trait than human kindness: human malice.

London on the threshold of the 1890's was the metropolis of liberalism triumphant, especially for Jews. Shylock and Fagin were dead and gone; the lowliest residents of Whitechapel could now be shown sympathetically to the fastidious and sophisticated readers of *Pall Mall Magazine*, as demonstrated by one of Britain's youngest and most

promising literati, twenty-five-year-old Israel Zangwill. His column was called "Without Prejudice," and written with the all-comprehending, all-forgiving condescension of a Victorian liberal. He was the prototype of what might be described as a "re-assimilationist": a Jew steeped to the marrow in the outlook and way of life, the mores and standards of his Gentile fellow citizens, who made a terrific effort to prove to himself and everybody that he really belonged elsewhere. As usual in such cases, he never fully convinced those he tried to resemble. "The ghetto explorer," they called him in Yiddish.

An authentic Hebrew poet, newly arrived in London from Palestine, was grist for Zangwill's mill. He immediately appropriated Imber. They became "dear friends." Zangwill took Hebrew lessons from Imber, polished the English that Imber had learned from the Oliphants, and invited him to write for his *Jewish Standard*. Imber wrote about King Solomon. "But not," he said later, "as the Jews like to see him"—and presumably not as Zangwill liked to see him either. The plot thickened when Zangwill thought he knew enough Hebrew, and Imber thought the wealthy young Londoner might go on paying him anyway. A man who thought so was a *shnorrer* in the eyes of Zangwill.

Imber and Zangwill were like East and West, though each strove to be like the other. In the "Half-Asia" where Imber was born, the relationship of material and spiritual wealth was as Oriental as in the Arabian Nights or in India. Herzl Imber had been helped by the Auerbachs, by Dr. Levinstein, by rich men in Galicia and all over the Balkans; in Palestine he lived off the Oliphants as a matter of course, while his prodigious writing was probably done free of charge. When he had money or money's worth he would give it away. The fact that he was "a modern Diogenes," that "his wants were few and easily satisfied," was not discovered until want had killed him.

A lady who liked him marveled that he "would rather toss away a bag of gold in one *beau geste* than eat!" Yet he liked to eat, as much as anyone. The English-style break-

fasts served by Alice Oliphant in the lovely house at Dalieh on Carmel kept hovering before his mind's eye in his later, leaner days. One of the early poems in *Barkai* said, "What will a paean help me in my tomb? . . . Give me bread, Muse, and clothes for my body—that I ask!" He was no ascetic. He simply failed to understand the Western equations for ideal values and "real values," and the techniques which our modern civilization has evolved for turning the first into the second. His mode of living was attuned to the East; in the West the most charitable word for it was "unconventional." He wanted to be modern, but the philosophy of materialism was beyond him. He could adopt only the trappings of the West: a cane, nationalism, alcoholic beverages, and the scientific explanation of miracles.

Imber had spent less than two years in England when a worldwide bestseller came from Zangwill's facile pen, a novel with the title *Children of the Ghetto* and the subtitle "A Study of Peculiar People." One of the peculiar people was a Hebrew poet, Melchizedek Pinchas. "Pinchas was indeed a figure of mark, with somebody else's frock-coat on his meager person, his hair flowing like a dark cascade under a broad-brimmed hat, and his somber face aglow with genius and cocksureness." The character's face was "hatchet-shaped and not unlike an Aztec's." So was Imber's. He usually carried "a heap of little paper-covered books in one hand, and an extinct cigar in the other." So did Imber. Like Imber he sported a cane, lived in a dark little room, was addicted to "spirituous nightcaps," and expected other people to defray the cost of the nightcaps as well as the rest of his living expenses.

Toward the end of the book, having dispelled any doubt that his "dear friend" had modeled for Pinchas, the author took steps to protect himself and his publisher from libel charges. Another character squelched Pinchas by referring to "our great national Hebrew poet, Naphtali Herz Imber," and proceeded to declaim *Mishmar Hayarden* in Israel Zangwill's translation. (Today the right to quote or translate published poetry

is worth money—but the chances are against Imber's having received anything for the advertisement.)

The first encounter with the West had been painful. The thing to do, Imber decided, was to go farther west. In 1892 he embarked for New York, in steerage.

"A QUEER little man that has been seen on the streets for the past few days is a Hebrew poet. Not that he looks like one any more than hundreds of other strange-looking people who come and go out of a big city. His dark skin, his coal-black hair, long, thick and curly, his dark-brown eyes, his straight back, his strong facial bones make him seem a son of Italy rather than Austria, and a Christian rather than a Hebrew. Now he is in distress, as he will tell you. . . ."

The Cincinnati *Times-Star* headlined this story, "The Harp of David in the Hands of a Child of Galicia and of the World." Papers elsewhere ran similar items during Imber's first year in this country. He did not make a secret of his distress. He told reporters about his library, "pawned throughout the state of Illinois." He told them about falling ill in New York and being "excluded from the big Mount Sinai Jewish hospital." He talked bitterly of his arrival in the New World, of being "hailed by the Jewish press as a thinker, poet, and scientist" for a day and then left to his own devices.

His was the disappointment common to all immigrants of minor news value who do not know how to cash in on their fleeting glory. Others have come to resent America for the experience. Imber resented the Jews.

On the Lower East Side—a larger, even more Westernized Whitechapel—he encountered his songs. *Tikvosenu* was chanted by the Eastern European Jews there, to a tune of uncertain origin; they simply called it "The Hope" now, *Hatikvah*, and rarely connected it with the gaunt, poorly dressed newcomer, until he told them. It was a thing to flatter a poet's vanity, an advance payment on immortality as it were. But Imber found that here a claim to immortality would not keep body and soul together. At most, it was

good for an occasional free drink in one of the *kibitzarnias* on Canal and Grand Streets. As for a livelihood, everyone pointed to another East Side poet, the venerable gray-beard Eliakum Zunser: his Yiddish "Return to Zion" rivaled "Hatikvah" in popularity, but he kept a shop just the same. That you could not live on Hebrew poetry was obvious; a healthy man should make a living in business and versify in his spare time.

To Naphtali Herz Imber such sincere advice was worse than Zangwill's mockery. It was like blackmail, like a death threat unless he changed his innermost being. He did not blame the philosophy behind the advice, nor himself for failing to foresee it; he blamed the people who gave him this and no more, except a few drinks. Anyway, he took the drinks. They cushioned the shock. He built a glassy, alcoholic wall around himself to protect the holy land of his spirit from invasion by the Philistines.

He recalled Oliphant's stories of Harris, of the appeal of mysticism to Americans, and tried to open a Cabala class in New York. All he got out of it was the wrath of the rabbinate. He left town and toured the Midwest. Publicity flurries alternated with periods of hunger—and he was not so young as he had been in the Balkans. In Boston, where he wound up late in 1893, he sold articles to the *Jewish Chronicle*, the *Daily Traveler*, and the *Transcript*, and regained his sense of humor. He got even with the New Yorkers by having word of his death sent to the Lower East Side and watching for the obituaries. "Some," he grinned later, "said very good things about me. They thought one should say no evil about the dead. What the truthful ones said I don't care to have reprinted."

In August 1895 a new magazine called *Uriel* went on sale in Boston. It was a monthly devoted to "Cabbalistic Science." A year's subscription was to cost three dollars, a single issue twenty-five cents. Only two issues appeared altogether, and in the first the most remarkable item was an editorial self-portrait:

"Many great men have been punished for

attempting to reveal the wisdom of the Cabala, as our editor, Mr. Naphtali H. Imber whose portrait graces the frontispiece. . . . Mr. Imber's life is a romance of the most romantic type. . . . We recognize in him an offspring of that race to whom the Great Hebrew alluded when he said, 'No prophet is honored by his own people—' His bad luck, it then appeared, was due to "the frivolous temper of the Hebrews," and to "fanatic rabbis" who had "conspired to slander him, accusing him of becoming a Christian."

He wrote like an anti-Semite but felt slandered by the charge of apostasy. He vilified the Jews but flared up when he heard of anyone else attacking them. In the same year of 1895 he wrote two essays for the American government—"Letters of Rabbi Akiba" and "Education and the Talmud" (published in the 1896 Report of the Federal Bureau of Education)—contending that the rabbinical school system had never been equaled. He felt entitled to denounce the Jews, for like the prophet he chastised flesh of his flesh and spirit of his spirit.

He left Boston when *Uriel* folded, and went west again, this time for years. He rode the rails across the plains and the mountains and along the Pacific Coast, lecturing on mysticism and drinking, posing as "Mahatma Imber" before small-town audiences, and drinking, feuding with Madam Blavatsky, the high priestess of Theosophism, and drinking and writing Hebrew verse.

I tramp a perpetual journey;

I have no chair, no church, no philosophy. . . .

What Walt Whitman said of himself in a metaphysical sense applied to Imber in a physical one; and so did Swinburne's twofold description of Whitman as "a strong-winded soul with prophetic wings" and "a drunken apple-woman reeling in a gutter." The year 1897 found him in California, the frequent guest of a family of literary distinction and of Russian Jewish origin, Strunsky by name, whose young daughters were deeply impressed by his wit and his consumption of whisky: at dinner, having emptied his glass

and believing himself unobserved, he would pour a pint of whisky into his soup.

In 1898 he was in and around the Territories of New Mexico and Arizona. In Switzerland, six thousand miles away, the First World Zionist Congress launched the struggle for the Jewish state. At the close of the sessions all the delegates rose and sang "Hatikvah." The official record does not show that the author was mentioned.

In 1900 he was in Denver, Chicago, and other places. In Chicago, at the age of forty-four, he married a lady named Dr. Amanda Katie Davidson. She may have been as much a doctor as Imber was a mahatma. According to Zangwill she was "an American Christian crank." According to Imber's brother she was "like Ruth," adopted Judaism, and corresponded as faithfully as any Jewish daughter with her loving mother-in-law in Zloczov. According to Albert Parry, thus far the only chronicler of the American *Bohème*, "there was no doubt that she and Imber enjoyed themselves hugely traveling together in the obscure American provinces of the mauve decade with their stock of lectures on occultism." Twelve months later, at all events, this lady had gone out of Imber's life, never to reappear, and her only memento was the dedication of twelve Hebrew poems: "*La Sulamith*—for Dr. Amanda Katie Imber."

THE poems for Amanda-Sulamith, together with some twenty others of American origin, appeared in 1902 in the second volume of Imber's verse, but not in this country. *Barkai he-Hadash* ("The New Morning Star") was published in Zloczov by his brothers. It was an unlucky venture; a fire destroyed nearly the whole edition as it came off the press.

Imber was then slowly tramping back east across the continent. He lived without visible means of support, sighed, "A good steak is better than a gilded epitaph," and turned out new poems. Their date-lines marked a meandering trail to the Lower East Side: Chicago, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Rosenhayn and Woodbine in South Jersey—sites of a Jewish agricultural settlement founded by

Baron de Hirsch. In Chicago he wrote a plaintive "Prayer to the Tailor." In St. Louis he wrote "My Confession" as he was about to be operated on for blood poisoning; it began:

*Before me at the green table
The gamblers hullo aloud. . . .*

and ended as follows:

*I cry like an erring child
From Father's house driven—
And thou, Priest good and mild,
Speak out the word: "Forgiven."*

The English was Imber's. He had begun to translate his own verse into the last language of the six or seven he had mastered, and the only one, other than Hebrew, in which he wrote. Nothing delighted him more than to be complimented on his Hebrew and to answer, "You mean my English, don't you?"

These latest poems were different. Their themes were personal, their sarcasms gentler; there were lyrically introspective moods. Then suddenly an event rekindled Imber's fire. Nineteen hundred and three, the date of the Kishinev pogrom, cut through his next book like a caesura and lent an almost casual air to everything previous. Gone were the carping, self-pitying attitudes, the semi-anti-Semitic poses. A Jew indicted barbarism and forecast divine vengeance in "To Ivan the Terrible" (first printed in the *Jewish World* of June 4, 1903): "Japan and China will draw their swords against thee—" And when the Russo-Japanese War broke out a year later, the rejoicing prophet called his forthcoming volume *Barkai ha-Shelishi*: "The Avenging Morning Star," and dedicated it to the Emperor Mitsuhiro.

THE dedication of the third *Barkai* (New York, 1904) also revealed a turn in Imber's affairs. It was signed, "Your Majesty's faithful servant Naphtali Herz Imber, care of Judge Mayer Sulzberger, Philadelphia, Pa." At last he had found a Maecenas.

"My dear Benefactor and Patron," he pref-

aced his next work: "I have succeeded in capturing the beautiful *bulbul* which trilled out the sweetest songs in the Plains of Shiraz. I bring that songbird, known as Omar, to Your Honor in a Hebrew cage. . . ."

The Hebrew version of *The Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam* was published in 1905, financed by George Alexander Kohut, an eminent philanthropist, and somewhat superciliously introduced by a noted scholar, Joseph Jacobs. Any object of Judge Sulzberger's interest rose rapidly in the esteem of the Jewish-minded elite. The president of the Pennsylvania Court of Common Pleas was a dominant, sarcastic man of profound erudition, able to appreciate Imber's learning, enjoying his impudent wit, and for a time broadminded enough to take him as he was. To suggestions that he reform his protégé, the jurist used to reply, "Then he would no longer be Imber."

It could not last. Sulzberger was not amused when his court jester spent his allowance for one month on a glorious fiftieth birthday party for himself, inviting the whole Lower East Side. He cut the wastrel off with a dollar a day and named the head of the New York Public Library's Jewish Division, Abraham Freidus, as custodian. Freidus was another original; he made Imber come to the library for his daily dollar and search for it between the pages of a book—the idea being to force intellectual nourishment on him while he was still sober. For the initiated it used to be fun to watch Imber trying to charm an advance out of Freidus. Rebekah Kohut, George Kohut's mother and an international Jewish women's leader in her own right, noted admiringly that Imber "could move Sulzberger to howling mirth and towering rage, but he couldn't budge Freidus."

It was the same on the Lower East Side. The little people took their cues from the great; they made him a comic figure even in the *kibitzarnias*. Like a good trouper, Imber played his part to the hilt. He lived at 113 Forsyth Street in a dark, dirty little room where he had to burn candles at noon to read his own writing; but evenings, on his round of the cafés, the gaunt, shabby derelict would

pay for his liquor in verses improvised on demand, in sardonic humor and paradoxical brilliance, until they carried him home.

IN 1907 Zangwill had another go at him. If possible, *The Jewish Hamlet* was even more unkind than *Children of the Ghetto*, but afterwards Zangwill graciously credited his old friend with "the virtues as well as the faults of a typical Bohemian." This discovery promptly resolved all difficulties of classification and conscience. Everyone knows that bohemians abhor the conventional security of the bourgeois. Rebekah Kohut even made Imber "a born bohemian." Albert Parry elected him "King of the Jewish *Bohème*" and gently mocked his "magnificent, homage-inviting appearances" at Zionist meetings, to collect drinks for his old hymn.

One may wonder how a writer of today would feel, seeing one of his works reprinted time after time, with copies sold and given away by the thousands and royalties confined to drinks; but of course the writers of today are not "born bohemians." Imber, one of the few times he fell out of his new character, asked just one question: "Many people enjoy my 'Hatikvah,' many booksellers got rich on it—and what do I have after fifty years of work?"

"I'm the originator of the Zionist movement," he told a reporter who interviewed him at the Café Royal. "I started it; now I'll let others carry on and get the glory." The interviewer, Hutchins Hapgood, was to become one of America's great liberal figures; at the time he was writing a series of East Side profiles for the *Commercial Advertiser* (later published in book form with drawings by an obscure Lower East Side boy named Jacob Epstein). Hapgood found Imber "difficult to take seriously." He perceived "many of the more humorous and less impressive peculiarities of the character in Zangwill's book." Thirty years later he still recalled "both a Voltairean and a comic character—as critical as the great French writer and more cynical, and in a way also an amusing clown—"

Imber said, "If you wish to know the spirit

and purpose of my Hebrew poems, I'll tell you. For two thousand years Hebrew poetry has been nothing but lamentations. There've been no love songs, no wine songs, no songs of joy—nothing pagan. There've been no poets, only critics in rhyme. Now what I did in my Hebrew verses was to do away with lamentations. . . . My theme, indeed, is Zion. I'm an individualist. It's the only 'ism' I believe in, and I want my nation to be individual, too. I want them to be joyously themselves, and so I'm a Zionist."

He said, "I've now perfected Zionism, so I'm free to pass to mysticism, on which I'm deeply at work. It is difficult to persuade Americans to become mystics; their philosophy is what I call Barnumism. . . . Psychology is the only science. I've written on everything, and I know almost nothing about the subjects on which I write. Much of my work is satirical. I've published many articles satirizing the rabbis, who consequently hate me. I call them 'silk-chimney rabbis.' I don't think they will say *kaddish* for my soul when I'm dead. And yet I'm no skeptic exactly. . . ."

The clown was thinking of death. "Wine they give me, but they wouldn't give me a burial," he complained to an undertaker friend when he was close to fifty. The friend, User Marcus, promised to bury him in exchange for a poem. The contract was sent to Judge Sulzberger to be made legal, and the stanzas of "A Grave as a Cure for Sickness" fulfilled Imber's part of the bargain.

The pauper made his will. These were the main provisions: "To the rabbis I leave what I don't know—it will help them to a longer life. To my enemies I leave my rheumatism. To the Jewish editors I leave my broken pen, so that they can write slowly and avoid mistakes."

He deteriorated almost hourly. His appearance became pathetic, his face deeply lined, his mottled hair uncut, his clothing in a disgraceful state of disrepair. Only the sad eyes and the mocking, sardonic smile remained of the old Imber. Respectable Jewish figures shunned the exponent of a most "un-Jewish" vice, and the few who sympathized with him ransacked the history of

literature for comparable cases. Zangwill and Rebekah Kohut agreed on François Villon. Someone else detected a resemblance to Edgar Allan Poe and hastened to tell Imber. Imber glanced up from his glass, chuckled—"What—this drinker?"—and withdrew again into his alcoholic seclusion, behind the wall that shielded what was still his own.

His pockets continued to bulge with scraps of paper full of Hebrew script. It became a standard joke that he was carrying his life's work with him. The joke came closer to the truth than the jokers knew; posthumously issued under the title *Treasures of Two Worlds; Unpublished Legends and Traditions of the Jewish Nation*, the scribblings of Imber's years of decay surprised the experts. They contained a wealth of half-mystical, half-scientific material on the Bible as fact, on its understanding through music, on Moses as the discoverer of electricity and Solomon as the inventor of the telephone—on scores of ideas which we connect today with such names as Velikovsky and Silvio Gesell.

In mid-September 1909 he finished a Hebrew poem on the Hudson-Fulton celebration just before being taken to Mount Moriah Hospital on East 2nd Street, with "a complication of diseases." He remained in the hospital long enough to compose a facetious death notice in Yiddish verse for the *Kibitzer*, the humorous journal of the Lower East Side. Then—"under the charm of the mild autumn weather," as a *New York Times* reporter put it—he "left and wandered to all his old-time haunts." Next morning he was found unconscious in Forsyth Street by Bernard Semel, the president of the hospital, and again removed there. He had suffered a stroke of paralysis, and in the evening of October 7 the *Times* learned that his death was only a matter of hours. He died at dawn.

October 8 was the day of Simchas Torah, and the *Kibitzer* ran Imber's death notice under a drawing of a bottle, with the caption, "On Simchas Torah all *shikorim* are sober."

AFTER the tragedy came the farce. First the Rivington Street congregation ruled out funeral services in its synagogue

because Imber had not been a religious man. That did it.

Never in the annals of the Lower East Side had there been such breast beating and righteous indignation. Communal rivalries flared up over the corpse: when it turned out that User Marcus's burial plot was located in the Rumanian Jewish cemetery at Bayside, the Galician Jews "violently" insisted on the right to bury their countryman. Marcus had to waive his exclusive privilege. At the bier in the Attorney Street synagogue, three different rabbis scathingly denounced the zealots of Rivington Street: "Good, kind, noble Imber was infinitely a holier, better, and more godly man than ever a synagogue congregation was," Rabbi Joseph Scheff cried amid tremendous applause. Rabbi Scheff orated in Yiddish, Rabbi Magnes of Temple Emanu-El in English, Rabbi Buechner in German. There was no eulogy in Hebrew for the Hebrew poet. Among the notables absent from his funeral was Judge Mayer Sulzberger.

As the coffin was carried out of the hall, all the mourners rose and intoned "Hatikvah." Streets around the Educational Alliance building were black with crowds waiting for the procession to start; the turnout was estimated at ten thousand, and two hundred police were on hand to keep order. The cortège moved slowly, escorted by the strains of "Hatikvah." Placed at the head of the grave was a tablet with its text.

THE obituaries agreed that Imber, despite undeniable minor failings, had been a genius and would never be forgotten.

Only one paper, the Yiddish *Zukunft*, struck a different note. What it had to say (allowing for the inadequacy of the English language in conveying Yiddish feeling) was this:

"Poor Imber, you were no friend of the quick lunch and rapid transit. They were all so ignorant of him. He had deep contempt in his wise eyes for many of his fellow men. The collar on his neck was dirty. There was an odor of cheap tobacco about him. Ragged and hungry, he went around among

those who keep washing themselves all the time, no matter how much dirt there may be in their hearts. But they wrote no love songs. He had no roof over his head, no one shed a tear of pity for him, he had no place on earth, least of all in New York. And yet he told them everything to their faces—he who had no money.

"He was a modern Diogenes and would have slept in a barrel if it hadn't been for our strict police. Like Diogenes he looked for human beings with a lantern and asked nothing of the high and mighty but that they shouldn't stand between him and the sun.

"He was a cynic. His Zionism went hand in hand with cynicism, as, for him, the incense of *Kashrut* with the smell of cheap liquor. But he was a free man, an independent spirit, a man with backbone. The poet of 'Hatikvah,' who loved a Christian woman.

"He didn't care about kosher and *treife*; he despised tyranny in his innermost soul and always fought it, even in literature. He took what he could get. But he didn't beg. He said, 'Give me, you dog,' and he did not say, 'Thank you.' The ghetto explorer Zangwill made a King of Shnorrs of him. But he didn't *shnorr*, Mr. Zangwill. He took wherever he could, but he didn't wag his tail, Mr. Zangwill.

"He's better off dead.

"For under his dirty clothes was a sensitive heart—and now that ten thousand have come to his funeral, now he is suddenly a singer, a sage, and the ones who used to squirt poisoned filth at him, who abused and bespattered him, are now running to praise him! All of a sudden they have changed their practice and sing paeans—to the dead man!

"Dear Imber, I don't bemoan you. You could never have lived to see that. You're better off dead."

The idea would have amused Imber. So would the "Hebrew folk songs" of today. He had no taste for paeans over his tomb, but he would have prided himself on the supreme achievement of a poet: to live by his works alone.